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SERMON

PREACHED AT THE CELEBRATION OF THE

TERCENTENARY OF SHAKESPEARE'S BIRTH.



EVERY GOOD GIFT FROM ABOVE:

BEING

A SERMON

PREACHED IN

THE PARISH CHURCH OF STRATFORD-UPON-AVON

ON

SUNDAY, APRIL 24, 1864,

AT THE

CELEBRATION OF THE TERCENTENARY OF SHAKESPEARE'S BIRTH.

BY

RICHARD CHENEVIX TRENCH, D.D.

ARCHBISHOP OF DUBLIN.

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NEW-STREET SQUARE

SERMON.

JAMES I. 17.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights.

It has, I think, been devised wisely and well that the services of to-day should stand, if possible, in some connection with the celebrations which will fill up the remainder of the week. You, who have sought that such a connection should exist, have thus declared many things. You have declared first, that you have no intention nor desire to separate the gift from the Giver—to glorify the one, and to forget or leave out of sight the other—to make much of man at the expense of Him who is the God of man, and from whom all the wit, wisdom, intelligence, or goodness that any man has ever possessed, originally came; being, as these are and must be, little fragments, so to speak, of the divine heart or mind. You have declared that for you, in the words so opportunely occurring in the service of this morning, “*every* good gift is from above, from the Father of lights;” so truly the Father of all lights, that each other lesser light can only have been derived from his, and must have been kindled first at his authentic fires.

Nor less do you declare that as all things come of Him, so we are bound to render unto Him thanks for all; and if for the magnificence of that earth which He has framed for man’s dwelling-place, for the hills which He has set so fast with his power, for “this brave over-hanging firmament fretted with

golden fires," so it behoves us first and chiefly to praise Him for his most excellent creature man, "the beauty of the world," the crown of things, the first-fruits of his creatures; and if for man, then most of all for those men who marvellously transcend their fellows, who, "framed in the prodigality of nature" or of grace, reveal to us the possibilities of greatness or of goodness which are in man. Yes, apart from all the pleasure or profit which we may have of these, we are bound to praise Him that He has given such gifts unto men, shewn them capable of receiving the same; for such is the fellowship of our race, so intimately are we bound up with one another, that what is given to one may in some sort be considered as given to all, and from that one, glory and honour to redound to all.

It has then, doubtless, been well imagined that the sacred services of to-day, in nothing abating their spiritual character, should yet blend themselves, as harmoniously they may, with the other more festal solemnities of the time. One thing only I could willingly have desired—namely, that on some other, less unequal to the occasion, had devolved the task of tracing the connection between them, and of weaving the one into the other. But it is often our true humility to do what we are bidden, even while we know how imperfectly we shall do it—this rather than to withdraw from the proffered task in that pride which will not endure to attempt anything that it cannot hope to crown with a perfect success. One fitness, indeed, I possess—namely, that I am not wholly unaware of the difficulties of my undertaking. To this I shall address myself now; only first on one or two points challenging your considerate forbearance.

Thus, if I *preach* about Shakespeare, and that method of treatment sound somewhat novel and unusual in your ears, you will still remember that this is the very thing which I

am set to do; which thus in my office as a minister of Christ, and in his holy house, I could alone consent to do. And then, if in so doing I pass over innumerable aspects on which he presents himself to us, and contemplate him only upon one—though that, indeed, the most important of all, namely, the directly moral—it is not because others are indifferent to me, or as supposing them indifferent to you; but because here I have no right, as certainly I have no desire, to contemplate him in any other aspect than this.

What reason have we then to celebrate with a jubilee the fact that three hundred years ago Shakespeare was born? or, to put the question in the form and fashion which this hour and this house will naturally suggest, Why do we thank God, wherein have we just ground to praise Him, that such a man has been among us? what is there in his writings to render them an enduring benefit to us, a possession for ever; such as we feel makes us richer, wiser, and using it aright, better than we should have been without it? This is the question which I propose a little to consider this morning.

If indeed the literature of a nation were merely an amusement of the cultivated few, the ornament of their idler hours, then what the fashion of it was, or what manner of men they were who formed it for us, would be of very slight importance indeed; could scarcely at the best afford matter of serious thanksgiving. We might desire that it should be graceful, as we should desire that the garniture of our houses or of our persons should be graceful—that it should entertain without corrupting: our desires could scarcely extend further. But a nation's literature is very much more than this. The work of its noblest and most gifted sons, the utterance of all which has been deepest and nearest to their hearts, it evokes and

interprets the unuttered greatness which is latent in others, but which, except for them, would never have come to the birth. By it the mighty heart of a people may be animated and quickened to heroic enterprise and worthiest endeavour. With the breath of strong, and purifying emotions, it can stir to a healthy activity the waters of a nation's life, which would else have stagnated and putrefied and corrupted. Having such offices, being capable of such effects as these, of what vast concern it is, that it should deal with the loftiest problems which man's existence presents—solve them, so far as they are capable of solution here, point to a solution behind the veil where this only is possible; that, whatever it handles, things high or things low, things eternal or things temporal, spiritual or natural, it should be sound, should be healthy; clear, so far as possible, of offence; enlisting our sympathies on the side of the just, the pure, and the true. Of what supreme concern it is that those who so contribute to frame and fashion a nation's life, should be men reconciled with God's scheme of the universe, cheerfully working in their own appointed sphere the work which has been assigned them there, accepting God's world, because it is his, with all its strange riddles and infinite perplexities, with all the burdens which it lays upon each one of us—not fiercely dashing and shattering themselves, like imprisoned birds, against the bars of their prison-house, or moodily nourishing in their own hearts, and in the hearts of others, thoughts of discontent, revolt and despair.

Such a poet, I am bold to affirm, we possess in Shakespeare. For must we not, first of all, thankfully acknowledge a healthiness, a moral soundness in all, or nearly all, which he has written?—that on his part there is no paltering with the everlasting ordinances on which the moral estate of man's life reposes, no challenging of the fitness of these, no sum-

moning of God to answer for Himself at the bar of man for the world which He has created? Then, too, if he deals with enormous crimes—and he could not do otherwise, for these, alike in fiction and in reality, constitute the tragedy of life—yet the crimes which he deals with travel the common road of human guilt, with no attempt upon his part to extend and enlarge the domain of possible sin; and certainly with no desire to paint it in any other colours than its own. He dallies not with forbidden things. All which the Latins, with so just a moral instinct, styled *infanda* and *nefanda*, things not to be spoken of any more than to be done, these, which thus declare themselves unutterable, remain with rarest exception unuttered by him.

And in his dialogue, if we set him beside those of his age and time, how little, by comparison with them, is there which we wish away from him, would fain that he had never written. There are some of his cotemporaries whose jewels, when they offer such, must be plucked out of the very mire; who seem to revel in loathsome and disgusting images, in all which for poor human nature's sake we would willingly put out of sight altogether. What an immeasurable gulf in this matter divides him from them! while of that which we *must* regret even in him, a part we have a right to ascribe to an age, I will not say of less purity, but of less refinement and coarser than our own; and of that which cannot be thus explained, let us at all events remark how separable almost always it is from the context, leaving, when thus separated, all which remains perfectly wholesome and pure. There are writers, but he is not one of them, whose evil is inwoven with the texture of their writings, the very web and woof of these; writers who defile everything which they touch; for whom, and ere long for whose readers, nothing is pure, one foul exhalation and miasma of corruption presently enveloping them both.

But Shakespeare, if he has wrought any passing wrong, or given any just occasion of offence in the matters of which we speak, let us not forget the compensations which he has made—that we owe to him those ideals of perfect womanhood, which are the loveliest, perhaps the most transcendent, creations of his art. Shakespeare's women,—we have but to mention them, and what a procession of female forms, whose very names make music in our ears, move at once before the eyes of our mind. Surely if the woman be in God's intention the appointed guardian of the sanctities of home, the purities of domestic life, we owe him much who has peopled the world of our imagination with shapes “so perfect and so peerless” as are these. True it is that we want far more than art, far more than the highest which art can yield, to keep us holy, to preserve us from the sin of our own hearts, from the sin of the world around us; and there is no more fatal mistake than to forget this. Neither dare we affirm of Shakespeare himself that he was always true to those ideals of female loveliness which he had created, that he never broke faith with them. We have evidence—he himself supplies it—evidence, as I think, not to be gainsaid, that there was a period of his life when he laid up much matter of after-sorrow and self-reproach for himself—in his own wonderful words, “gored his own thoughts, sold cheap what is most dear;” for what so dear as innocence and self-respect?—he, too, a diamond only to be polished in its own dust; and, like so many a meaner man, making in one part of his life work of repentance for another. But with all this we dare affirm an habitual delight in the purest, the noblest, and the fairest on the part of one who, in the workshop of his imagination, forged a Miranda and an Imogen. “Filth savours but itself,” feeds, and would fain lead others to feed, on the garbage in which alone it finds pleasure. Of Shake-

speare be it said, that he who has painted his long gallery of women, holy, and pure, and good, walking in fearless chastity through the world, has painted, in anything like full length, only one wanton woman throughout all the ample range of his art, and her only for scorn and contempt.

There is another matter in which, as it seems to me, we owe a large debt of gratitude to Shakespeare, namely, in the fairness, the justice which he displays to all sorts of men, and this even when he was under the strongest temptation to withhold it. He may thus have helped us to something of the same fairness too. Take an example of what I mean. Shakespeare was the child of the England of the Reformation. He was born of its spirit; he could never have been what he was, if he had not lived and moved in the atmosphere, intellectual and moral, which it had created. Nor was he merely its unconscious product. One who so loved England, "this demi-paradise," who dwelt with such affection on the annals of her past glory, who allows the beatings of his own patriot heart to be so clearly felt and seen as he tells the story of Agincourt, could not have been indifferent to the assertion of national independence which the Reformation involved. Indeed, all of us must have felt that we heard not another, but Shakespeare himself, speaking in those grand words with which he makes King John put back the pretensions of a foreign priest to "tithe and toll" in the dominions of an English king. And yet, born as he was of the spirit of the Reformation, with the after-agitations of that mighty struggle not yet subsided, welcome as would have been to multitudes of his hearers a holding up to hatred or ridicule or contempt of the proud prelate, the scandalous friar, the incontinent nun, there is a noble absence in his writings of everything of the kind. As often as he does introduce members of any religious order, they are full of kindly help

for others, and themselves grave, serious, devout. Indeed; we number among these the stately and severe Isabella, who, if she exaggerates aught, does it upon virtue's side. A grand self-respect on the part of the poet will not allow him to fall in with popular cries, to howl with the wolves, to trample on the weak or the prostrate; and he has helped in this to teach the English people a lesson which they have not altogether failed to learn. That we have here the explanation of what has just been noted, and not in any lingering affection upon his part to Romish doctrines and practices, is clear from the fact that he bears himself exactly in the same fashion towards the Puritans. Here, too, there can be no manner of doubt that any amount of abuse of these sectaries, just beginning to make themselves felt and feared, would have been welcome to large numbers of the playgoers of the time, that excellent sport might have been made of all which was peculiar and extravagant in them. Others, indeed, have not scrupled to make it; but, bating a few passing jests with no malice in them, the shafts of his ridicule are never directed against them; nor, indeed, we may take this occasion to add, against any earnest form of religious life whatsoever. He knew too well the danger of confounding the false and the true of religion in a common reproach; and how easily the scorn, meant for the one, might be made to light upon the other.

But once more—Shakespeare has been found fault with by the critics of the last century, that, as they complain, “he seems to write without any moral purpose,” that he “makes no just distribution of good or evil.” It is a shallow view of art, as of life, which could alone have given birth to this accusation. It is true that the moral intention of Shakespeare's poetry does not lie on the surface, is not obtruded; it may and will often escape the careless reader. But it is there, lying deep

as do nearly all the lessons which God teaches us through our own lives, or through the lives of others. To no one of the uninspired writers of the world has it been granted, I believe, so strongly to apprehend, so distinctly to make visible, that men reap as they have sown, that the end lies in the beginning, that sooner or later "the wheel will come full circle," and "the whirligig of time bring round its revenges." Who else makes us so and with such a solemn awe to feel that justice walks the world—"delaying," it may be, but "not forgetting," as is ever the manner with the divine avengers? Even faults comparatively trivial, like that of Cordelia, he does not fear to show us what a train of sorrows, for this life at least, they may entail. Certainly we shall look in vain in him, as we look in vain through the moral universe, for that vulgar distribution of rewards and punishments in which some delight; neither is death, which may be an euthanasia, the divine cutting of some tangled knot which no human skill could ever have untied—not death, but dishonoured life, is, in his estimate, the worst of ills. So, too, if we would recognize these footsteps of God in the world, this Nemesis of life, which he is so careful to trace, we must watch his slightest hints, for in them lies oftentimes the key to, and the explanation of, all. In this, if I may say it with reverence, he often reminds us of Scripture, and will indeed repay almost any amount of patient and accurate study which we may bestow upon him. Let me illustrate what I say. They are but a few idle words dropt at random, which, in the opening scene of *King Lear*, make only too evident that Gloster had never looked back with serious displeasure at the sin of his youth, which stood embodied before him in the person of his bastard son; that he still regarded it with complacency, rolled it as a sweet morsel under his tongue. This son, his whole being corroded, poisoned, turned to gall and bitterness, by the ever present consciousness of the

cleaving stain of his birth, is made the instrument to undo him, or rather to bring him through bitterest agonies, through the wreck and ruin of his whole worldly felicity, to a final repentance. Indeed for once Shakespeare himself points the moral in those words, so often quoted, but not oftener than they deserve :

“ The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
Make instruments to plague us.”

But for this once that he points the moral of a life, a hundred times he leaves us to point it ; as indeed is almost always the manner in that Book of books, which, like Joseph's kingly sheaf, stands up in the midst of the field, that even the chiefest among the others may make obeisance to it.

Let me note, in connection with what has just been spoken, that the ideal characters of his art, just as the real characters of actual life, never stand still. They are rising or falling, growing better or growing worse, and ripening thus for their several dooms. Some we behold working out their lives into greater clearness and nobleness, making steps of their dead selves by which they are mounting to higher things. Summoned to the more stern and serious business of life, or brought into the school of adversity, we see them taking shame to themselves that they have played the truant hitherto, learning to look at life as something more than a jest, girding themselves in earnest to its tasks and toil, and leaving for ever behind them the frivolity and the vanity, it may be the folly and the sin, in which hitherto their years were spent. There is no dearer argument with Shakespeare than this, nor one to which he oftener returns.

And then, on the other side, he shows us them who will not use aright the discipline of life, who welcome and allow those downward-dragging temptations which beset us

all ; these waxing worse and worse, forfeiting what good they once possessed, strengthening in their evil, and falling from one wickedness to another. He shews us a Macbeth, met in that most dangerous hour, the hour of his success, giving place to the devil, allowing the wicked suggestion of the Evil One room in his heart, and then the dread concatenation of crime, one ever drawing on, and in a manner rendering necessary, another, till the end is desolation and despair, the blackness of darkness for ever. Where, I sometimes ask myself as I read, where is there a sermon on the need of resisting temptations at the outset, of treading out these sparks of hell before they have set on fire the whole course of nature, like that ?

And then, once more—to speak not of what Shakespeare has written, but what Shakespeare was—assuredly we owe him much for the connection which he has shown may exist between the loftiest genius and the most perfect sober-mindedness. He had for ever rendered absurd the notion that genius is of necessity irregular, unable to acquiesce in the ordinary conditions of human existence, or cheerfully to adapt itself to these. Doubtless it has often failed in this. There are too many to whom, whether by their own fault, or by some mysterious destiny, the very gifts of heaven have been fatal. The shore of human life is strewn with no sadder wrecks than some which these have made ; and not without abundant warrant did a poet of our own age sum up the lives of many who had gone before him—“the mighty poets *in their misery dead*.” Yes, mighty, but not the mightiest of all. He who towers above every other is memorable by all which we know of him for the even balance of all his faculties ; for the equable and harmonious development of his whole being ; for the unpretending simplicity which would not allow him to claim any exemptions, any immunities

on the score of genius for himself. In nothing eccentric, in nothing differing to the common eye from any other burgher of your town, he bought and sold in your streets; portioned his daughters; invested in prudent purchases the fruits of honourable toil; what he had thus fairly earned was prepared, if occasion required, to defend by such just help as the law afforded; shrunk from no humblest duty of every-day life; and yet all the while knew himself, for he must have known it, the dear heir of a memory which the world should never let die.

You will be asked, before you leave this church to-day, to contribute to the restoring and beautifying of its chancel, in which the dust of Shakespeare, for it is even so near to us, mingles with the common clay. It will be a fit opportunity of testifying that it is not lip-homage only which you render to his name. I will only ask you, as you prepare your offering, each to imagine to himself this England of ours without her Shakespeare; in which he had never lived or sung. What a crown would be stricken from her brow! How would she come down from the preeminence of her place as nursing mother of the foremost poet whom the world has seen, whom, we are almost bold to prophesy, it ever will see! Think how much poorer intellectually, yea, and morally, everyone of us would be; what would have to be withdrawn from circulation, of wisest sayings, of profoundest maxims of life-wisdom, which have now been absorbed into the very tissue of our hearts and minds! what regions of our fancy, peopled now with marvellous shapes of strength, of grace, of beauty, of dignity, with beings which have far more reality for us than most of those whom we meet in our daily walk, would be empty and depopulated! And remember that this which we speak of would not be our loss alone, or the loss of those who have lived already,

but the disappearance as well of all that delight, of all that instruction, which, so long as the world endures, he will diffuse in circles ever larger, as the recognition of him in his unapproachable greatness becomes every day more unquestioned, as he moves in the ages which are yet to come "through ever wider avenues of fame."

But of this enough. Cease we from man. Let no word be uttered by us here, which shall even seem to imply that the praise and honour, the admiration and homage, which a man may receive from his fellows are, or can be, the best, the crowning glory of life. Good they are; but they are not the best. Few, in the very nature of things, can be those illustrious sons of memory, dwelling apart from their fellows on the mountain peaks of their solitary grandeur, and dominating from these their own age, and the ages to come. To very few it can be granted, that their names shall resound through the centuries, that men shall make long pilgrimages to the place of their birth, gather up the smallest notices of them as infinitely precious, chide an incurious age which suffered so much about them, that would have been priceless to us, to perish for ever, or celebrate with secular solemnities the returning period of their birth. All this must be the heritage of the fewest; but because such, it cannot be the best of all; for a righteous God would never have put his best and fairest beyond the reach of well-nigh all among his children. This is not the best. That is the best which all may make their own, those with the smallest gifts as certainly as those with the greatest, faithfully to fulfil humble duties; to follow Christ, it may be by lowliest paths, unseen of men, though seen of angels and approved of God; and so to have names written not on earth, but in heaven, not on the rolls of earthly fame, but in the Lamb's book of life. For, brethren beloved, I should be untrue to that solemn trust which I bear,

untrue to those responsibilities from which I can never divest myself, if I did not remind you, above all if I did not remind you on such a day as this, that goodness is more than greatness, and grace than gifts; that men attain to heaven not soaring on the wings of genius, but patiently climbing by the stairs of faith and love and obedience; that the brightest crowns, if all their brightness is of earth and none from heaven, are doomed to wither; that there is but one amaranthine crown, even that which Christ gives to them, be they high or low, wise or simple, emperors or clowns, who have loved, and served, and obeyed Him.

This crown they have obtained, the serious and sage poets who have consecrated their divine faculty to the service of Him who lent it. For myself, I am strong to believe that from one so gentle, so tender, so just, so true, as was Shakespeare, the grace to make this highest consecration was not withholden—that we have a right to number him with Dante, with Spenser, with Milton, and that august company of poets—

“Who sing, and singing in their glory move.”

His intimate, in some sense his profound, acquaintance with Scripture, no one can deny, or the strong grasp which he had of its central truths. He knew the deep corruption of our fallen nature, the desperate wickedness of the heart of man; else he would never have put into the mouth of a prince of stainless life such a confession as this: “I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me, . . . with more offences at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in.” He has set forth the scheme of our redemption in words as lovely as have ever flowed from the lips of uninspired man :



A SERM

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“Why, all the souls that were, were forfeit once,
And He that might the vantage best have took
Found out the remedy.”

He has put home to the holiest here their need of an infinite forgiveness from Him, who requires truth in the inward parts :

“How would you be,
If He which is the top of judgment, should
But judge you as you are ?”

He was one who was well aware what a stewardship was his own in those marvellous gifts which had been entrusted to him, for he has himself told us—

“Heaven does with us as we with torches do,
Not light them for themselves ; for if our virtues
Did not go forth of us, 't were all alike
As if we had them not.”

And again he has told us that—

“spirits are not finely touched
But for fine issues ;”

assuredly not ignorant how finely his own had been touched, and what would be demanded from him in return. He was one who certainly knew that there is none so wise that he can “circumvent God ;” and that for a man, whether he be called early or late,

“Ripeness is all.”

Who shall persuade us that he abode outside of that holy temple of our faith, whereof he has uttered such glorious things—admiring its beauty, but not himself entering to worship there? One so real, so truthful, as all which we learn about Shakespeare declares him to have been, assuredly fell in with no idle form of words, when in that last testa-

ment which he dictated so shortly before his death, he first of all, and before all, commended his soul to God his Creator; and this (I quote his express words), “hoping and assuredly believing through the only merits of Jesus Christ my Saviour to be made partaker of life everlasting.”

Yes, brethren, he has shown us here the one gate of heaven, and there is no other gate by which any man may enter there.

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